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ABSTRACT

Traditional, product-oriented testing must be abandoned if instructors in college reading and study skills programs are to effectively evaluate student educational outcomes. Such tests are hardly compatible with the way the brain functions, in that they require precise answers to precisely worded questions which are the product of the test-maker's perception system and not that of the test-taker. The functions of a reading or study skills course involve not merely the absorption of facts that can be measured by the numerical results of a test, but a personal process by which each student utilizes course content to reassess and restructure his/her perceptions and responses to his/her school and home environments. Accordingly, a study skills course should allow the student to act as both analyst and recipient of data and should take into consideration the various levels of sophistication in the thought processes of the students. Such a course emphasizes learning (internal activity) rather than teaching (external manipulation) and is best evaluated using an informal process incorporating formative and summative elements. This may be accomplished using group evaluation, open-ended questions, student testimonials, exit interviews with students, and follow-up of students' academic success. (JP)

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Study Skills Evaluation:

Why Does Who Do What and How?

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Abstract

Even though it is often necessary to use tests to evaluate the effectiveness of a study skills program, there are some inherent problems involved. Traditional "product oriented" tests often do no reflect what a course in study skills teaches: the process of effective study methods. In order to test the effectiveness of teaching students how to learn it is essential to keep the student as the pivotal point of any assessment. What teachers must keep in focus is the humanistic element in the learning process. The human brain is a complex machine, well designed to carry out its primary function: learning. What teachers who evaluate student performance in study skills programs must remember is to be certain that what they expect of the students conforms to what is known about how the human brain operates. If learning is seen as a process, then assessment too must be process oriented.

"If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

(From The Leopard by Lampedusa)

The problems involved in testing to evaluate the relative effectiveness of a college study skills program are both complex and multifold. The difficulties seem to lie with the overall complexity and interrelationships of the skills and sub-skills being taught. Any evaluation of the effectiveness of a program with a seemingly infinite number of variables could understandably cause the evaluator to feel as if s/he were engaged in the sisyphian task of rolling the proverbial boulder up to the top of the hill, only to see it role down to the bottom again; the evaluator figures out a way to assess the effectiveness of one aspect of the effective study program, only to discover several other variables, more complex and seemingly unmeasurable than the last.

If testing and showing "gains" were the chief end of a reading-study skills program the problem would perhaps be much simplified; but gains by themselves are really indicative of very little if one views learning as a process rather than a product. Often the students will make signficant personal gains in a reading course, but if these particular gains happen by coincidence not to be a part of what is being measured by the chosen "instrument" then there will be little indication that the students derived anything significant from their studies in the course. This is perhaps the classic shortcoming of tests: at best they are imprecise approximations designed to measure what the test maker perceives to be the natural outcomes

of a given pattern of learning. Calling tests "instruments," with the connotation that somehow this technology-oriented word will give the device an air of authority and precision, really does very little to ameliorate the situation. The main handicap is still there, and that handicap is the human brain itself.

Essentially the human brain is not particularly well designed for test taking because of two main factors:

1. tests often require precise answers to precisely worded questions and,
2. these precisely worded questions are the product of the perception system of the test maker, not necessarily that of the test taker.

According to Hart (3) and Restak (5) the human brain tends to work by making "sloppy approximations" of its external environment. Therefore new learning also tends to consist of general assumptions which fall within a given range of correctness. In other words, nature allows for a degree of latitude, a feature not often incorporated into many tests, especially if they are of the "objective" type. When the test maker constructs an objective examination s/he gives the students the opportunity to answer the questions only within a rather narrowed range of response, and this range is usually controlled by the test maker's field of perception. However, what is now known about perception is that it too is imprecise and is the result of external data being filtered through the individual brain's entire previous store of information and resulting biases collected and nurtured over a period of years of in-depth study in their chosen field; yet, this seems to be the case when teachers construct test questions which have precisely correct answers in order to objectively quantify and measure learning in their students (at

least according to the teacher's -- not the student's -- "window on the world").

So there appears to be two major handicaps to effective evaluation:

1. the limits of the instruments and testing procedures
2. coordinating what is being taught with what is being evaluated.

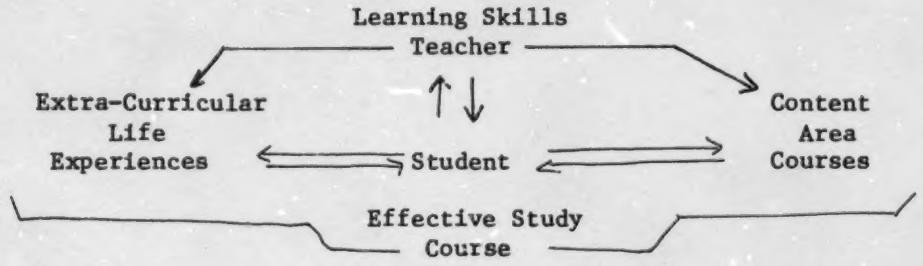
It is of crucial importance that a teacher of reading-study skills have a firm concept of the function of such a program in order to develop evaluative measures which will reflect the strengths and weaknesses of the program. Of uppermost importance is the process, the working of the whole program itself, not necessarily the product, or the numerical results of any particular survey or test. Measurement and evaluation exist to support and refine the program; the program does not exist in order to support the quantified evaluative results.

What then should be the key functions of an effective college reading-study skills program? According to Helen Aron there are four main concerns which must be addressed if the program is to meet the demands placed on it by the community college open enrollment student:

1. The reading and study skills area must become an equal component in the college program;
2. The program needs to become more comprehensive in order to cope with the great diversity of student needs;
3. The reading study skills curriculum must serve as a place where the student has adequate time, nonjudgmental guidance, and a conducive atmosphere for making realistic decisions about his/her life goals;
4. Finally, as a consequence of such self-examination, the student may legitimately conclude that her/his future

goals do not involve a traditional two-year college degree. (Aron, 1:234-5)

In other words, the study skills program must be carefully linked to the content area courses and yet it must act as a sort of sounding board and evaluative forum for the students in their school and home settings:



This proposed model is designed to demonstrate the coordinative nature of an effective study course. By and of itself the course has uncertain long term value, but as a framework which allows each student to re-assess and re-structure his/her perceptions and responses to the school and home environments, the effective study course can function as a temporary aid to the student until s/he can reevaluate his/her short and long term goals. Instead of a fragmented view of school life, personal life, and home life this model encourages a more holistic, brain compatible approach. The student can perceive learning as something highly personal, an activity that goes on both in and out of school

The Student as Focal Point

The chief product of a community college study skills program is not always an efficient scholar, ready to tackle all the challenges of academic courses. Instead the program needs to rest on a broader base which allows for a wider divergence in the exit behavior and competencies of the students. Any evaluation system of such a program must take this divergence into account, and it too must accordingly be flexible and adaptive.

What the community college reading-study skills course can offer to the widely divergent students who enroll is the opportunity to build and develop their various abilities to learn: as a goal this is within the reach of every student who enrolls, no matter what his/her background may be. To some degree or another everyone can learn. And in knowing that s/he is learning the individual student can improve in self-concept and gain self-confidence. The basis for this kind of "learning the learn" approach lies in the new brain concept of learning (Proster Theory). According to Leslie Hart:

> . . . the human brain was not "designed" for schools. And schools, dating back far beyond our modern brain knowledge, were not designed to fit the brain. To expect the brain, shaped by eons of evolution to adapt to schools is of course absurd. We need to design schools and teaching that are brain-compatible. . . group instruction in an elementary subject is certain to fail: it is grossly brain incompatible. (Teachers in conventional classrooms know this and persuade themselves that they individualize instruction. Careful observation shows that virtually no individualization actually occurs.)
>
> (3:393-4)

This is perhaps an example of what Fry calls the lag between the findings of research and the practical application of the findings in the classroom. In structuring the reading-learning skills course around new brain theory, the instructor must also be careful not to rely on conventional methods of evaluation: if the instruction is process oriented, so too must the evaluation be process oriented. It is probable that what the student learns is not entirely measurable; the skills and/or ideas which may be acquired might not be applied only to academic work, and there could be a considerable delay between the learning of the skills and their effective application.

Given this setting, an effective evaluation process should accomplish two major goals:

1. to allow the student to act as both analyst and recipient of the data.

Traditionally most evaluation on the college level has been designed to

measure quantifiable data, facts, numbers, specific information. Yet, a high value is placed upon the student's ability to be analytical, to synthesize and to evaluate what appears to be a myriad of often conflicting opinions and information. What must be abandoned is the perception of the student brain as a sort of sponge, willing to soad up whatever comes its way. Instead the brain is a highly selective filter being controlled by a lifetime of previous experiences and a highly sophisticated set of emotions.

2. to allow the instructor to see what learning processes are taking place and the various levels of sophistication in the thought processes of the students. Based on this information the instructor can then contribute evaluations and suggestions. The main goal is to maximize the learning, or internal activity, and minimize the teaching, or external manipulation.

Processing information is an activity that goes on within the brain and is therefore not entirely contrallable from the outside.

> The processing depends little on what or how the teacher has presented, and greatly on the total, previous, stored experience in that particular brain. Thus the standard presentation, lecture, recitation, and discussion that take up most of the instructional time in classrooms cannot be expected to produce learning in any reliable way.
> (Hart, 3:394)

The main consideration in any evaluation of a learning skills program should revolve around the learning experiences as an end in themselves. According to Tyler (6) there are five considerations in determining learning experiences:

1. opportunity to practice
2. the amount of student satisfaction
3. the degree to which the desired outcomes are within the capabilities of the learner
4. the variety of experience used to produce a particular objective

5. the necessity to overcome problems in learning (rote learning, rapid forgetting, vague or distorted recall, lack of familiarity with recent and accurate information)

Using these considerations as criteria, the evaluation of the reading-study skills program can be determined using an informal criterion referenced approach. According to Clymer (2) the main purpose in evaluating a reading, study skills program is to test whether or not the program is working and to improve the overall effectiveness of what is being taught and learned. Indications are that contemporary evaluators of these programs are tending to use more informal, self-constructed devices. But not matter what the evaluation technique, any effective evaluation of the program should reflect not only the product but the process, incorporating both formative and summative elements as well.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Program

If, for example, the main goal of a program is to help the students increase their ability to be flexible in using reading strategies including skimming, scanning, and study reading, the techniques for evaluating could involve the use of the following:

1. group evaluation procedures (process)
2. open-ended, evaluation provoking questions on short quizzes (formative)
3. student testimonials (formative)
4. overall course evaluation (summative)
5. student-instructor entrance/exit interviews (summative)
6. grade point average follow-up (product)

Evaluation is a critical component of any program of reading, whether it be strong and well established or an emerging curriculum, struggling through

its developing stages. Both types must change; and through carefully and humanistically applied evaluative techniques this change will ultimately produce a more viable program, better suited to the needs of the students. The task is a never ending process, and if sometimes it feels as if the labor is futile, the evaluator need only remind himself that it is the continual refinement of the whole teaching-learning process itself which is the ultimate goal.

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